

Chapter One

RELIGION

Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.

William James

SCHOLARLY APPROACHES TO RELIGION

The title of this book is *Religious Evidence*. We will begin in Chapter Three with our analysis of the quality of evidence that might be marshaled for, and against, the existence of God. In the first two chapters, however, we will begin with some important preliminaries regarding the adjective in the title. We need to get on the same page as to what we mean by "religious," "religion," and what we will be calling "theism."

The scholarly study of religion might be addressed from a number of disciplinary perspectives. The historian might focus on the tremendous significance that religious beliefs and conflicts have had in recorded human history for as long as we have had recorded human history. The anthropologist sees religion as an activity in virtually every known culture, some would say every known culture. The ethnographer (the field anthropologist who studies different cultures) is struck by the differences and similarities of religious practices, and hypothesizes about why we see these concrete manifestations of religious commitment. The psychologist,

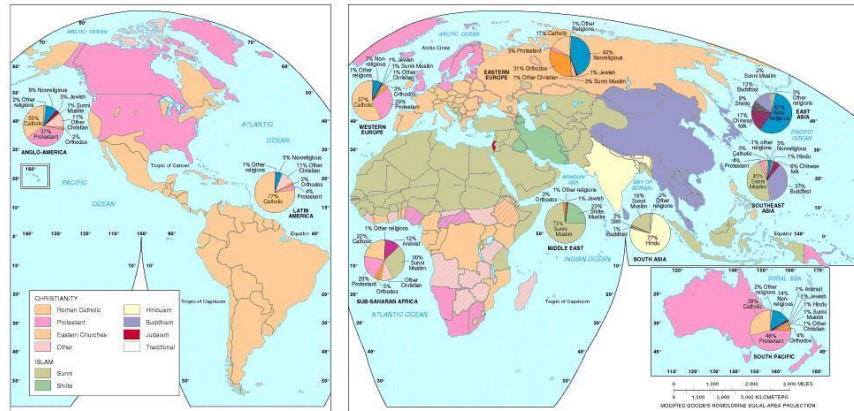
neuroscientist, and cognitive scientist focuses on the individual, seeking to understand the psychological and neurological components of belief, prayer, and religious experiences. All of these disciplinary approaches share what we might call an empirical methodology. These scholars see themselves as social and behavior scientists, seeking to understand this important aspect of human and social life.

If we understand religion as more than just an individual and social practice, but as an accumulation of beliefs, stories passed on in an oral tradition, and textual documents, including sacred texts, then the humanistic disciplines become relevant. Indeed we see important contributions to our understanding of religion in literature, the fine arts, and particularly philosophy and theology. I am trained as a philosopher, and this book is intended for philosophy students, so it should come as no surprise that there will be a clear emphasis on the philosophical understanding of religion and theism.

That being said, however, there is an important sense in which a full understanding of religion requires the partnership of all these scholarly approaches. One of the happy changes in my professional lifetime is the growing recognition that interdisciplinary inquiry is a requirement for wisdom and knowledge with any important question as pervasive and far-reaching as is religion. So be forewarned, our discussion will touch on social scientific hypotheses and methods almost as much as philosophical theories and methods.

PREVAILING RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Consider a map of the world showing the prevailing religious belief of citizens in the different countries. It would look something like the following.



It's hard not to be struck with the patterns and organization. North and South America is predominantly Christian, split between the Protestant U.S.A. and Canada, and the predominant Catholic to the south of our border. Northern Europe is Christian, while a wide band across the middle of Africa and Asia goes from Muslim to Hindu to Buddhist. Why such a definite pattern?

One way to answer this question is to ask yourself why you believe as you do. If you are like an overwhelming percentage of my students, you will answer that it is because of your family. Just like one's first language, the environment one grows up in has a huge influence a person's faith as an adult. Now there are exceptions to this generalization, of course, but when we see correlations like this, it's hard to deny that culture plays a dominant role in how and what one believes.

RELIGION AND CULTURE

Given the obvious cultural dimension to religion, we might pause just a bit to look at what anthropologists have said about all of this. We need to begin by recognizing that religion is more than a creed or set of beliefs, but an activity. People *practice* religion. They worship, build churches,

wear distinctive dress, and a host of other things. Why do we see this in almost every culture we have studied? Almost every anthropologist believes that religion must do something for the culture, it must perform some *function*.

Functional explanations of religion run the gamut from the ridiculous to the profound. Marx believed that religion was a device that rich people (the capitalists) used to placate the poor people (the proletariat) they were exploiting. He called religion the "the opium of the masses." Freud was equally harsh.

When the growing individual finds that he is destined to remain a child for ever, that he can never do without protection against strange superior powers, he lends those powers the features belonging to the figure of his father; he creates for himself the gods whom he dreads, whom he seeks to propitiate, and whom he nevertheless entrusts with his own protection. Thus his longing for a father is a motive identical with his need for protection against the consequences of his human weakness. The defense against childish helplessness is what lends its characteristic features to the adult's reaction to the helplessness which he has to acknowledge--a reaction which is precisely the formation of religion.¹

However insightful these thinkers may be as to features of the human condition, they are hardly giving religion much of a fair shake.

Much more plausible, in my mind, are those anthropologists who speculate that the role of religion in early and primitive societies was explanatory. There was so much in the natural and social world that was hard to understand. Appeal to a realm of reality outside of these immediate worlds help to make sense of them. Perhaps even more plausible are accounts of religion that see the institution as a complicated mechanism for "objectifying"

and legitimizing the norms that define the culture. Clifford Geertz presents such an account.

Religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.²

Almost certainly some of my readers are getting impatient with all of this social scientific speculation. Some of you must be asking yourself if the function of religion isn't to make the truth be known. It's difficult for sincere believers to fathom other social functions that their own faith might perform. But if we seek to understand the role of religion in human society, from its very beginning, to the diverse and interconnected world we live in today, we can hardly exclude our own culture, and our own religion, from such an analysis.

A WORKING DEFINITION OF RELIGION

Philosophers are fond of definitions. It's not so much that we are fixated on words, and we certainly don't see ourselves as dictionary writers. But when we think about such a rich and puzzling aspect of reality as religion, we can hardly help but ask ourselves what we mean by a religion. The "great" world religions represented by the map a few pages ago unite very different world views, doctrinal positions, and cultural practices, under the common heading of religion. What makes these very different "religions" all count as being "religion" rather than something else?

Lawyers and judges also care about definitions. Consider for a moment the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Our Supreme Court has struggled with the notion of religion because they have quite reasonably asked how one could determine if there has been an **establishment** of religion, or a prohibition on the **free exercise** of religion, without first knowing what counted as religion. If we look to the words and thoughts of the so-called founding fathers, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson are perhaps the most relevant. Madison offers a very conventional account of religion.

[T]he duty which we owe to our creator, and the manner of discharging it.

While Jefferson is more pluralistic. For him religion was:

was meant to be universal . . . to comprehend within the mantle of its protection the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo, and infidel of every denomination.

In contemporary constitutional law we see an almost studied refusal to define religion. Most of my students would include some reference to the spiritual, the divine, to gods, or to God, in their definitions. Our Supreme Court had no problem with such a definition in 1890

The term 'religion' has reference to one's views of his relations to his Creator, and to the obligations they impose of reverence for his being and character and of obedience to his will.³

Contemporary academic lawyers and jurists, perhaps from a fear of discriminating, have been much more inclusive in

their definitions. In a famous 1965 case, the Court quoted the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich.

And if that word (God) has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, *of what you take seriously without any reservation*. Perhaps, in order to do so you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God.⁴

The problem with such a liberal definition of religion is that it seems to embrace things that clearly matter to people, their *ultimate concern*, that most of us would find odd to classify as religious. I have friends who "take seriously without any reservation," feminism, concern for the environment, and the virtues of capitalism. These belief systems garner their personal commitments in ways that do have strong analogies to religious faith, but I still find it misleading to characterize the systems as religious systems. Perhaps the lesson here, as many anthropologists, philosophers, and theologians have discovered, is that the term *religion* doesn't admit to a nice crisp philosophical definition. It might be more like certain concepts (and words) like *game*, which seem to unite all the things we call games in ways like how members of a family "resemble" one another. It's not that one thing, the ears, or eyes, or the nose, or build are shared by every single sibling, or offspring, so no feature is "necessary," and no collection of features is "sufficient" for having a *family resemblance*. Still, individuals share enough of these features, we instantly recognize them as being related.⁵ It may be that the best we can hope for is some list of "semantically relevant" features that unites the different institutions and practices we are comfortable characterizing as religious.⁶

THREE WORLD VIEWS

I want to shift gears, now, and turn our attention to three very different *metaphysical* ways of comprehending the "nature of everything." One we will be calling *theism*. In many ways this is the view that most of you are most familiar with, and if you are like the majority of my students, it is the view that you personally endorse. It is a view that derives from the three great western religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It says, of course, that there are at least two different aspects to reality. The physical world, here, and the divine world with God, souls, and angels, among other things. Theism is a very rich and well-studied belief system. To even begin to do it justice, I will need to devote the entire second chapter to its basics.

The other two, I hope, can be covered here.

SECULAR NATURALISM

Many philosophers going well back before Plato and Socrates have speculated that all there is to reality is the physical stuff -- the particles, atoms, molecules, cells, and neurons -- of which modern science has been spectacularly successful in allowing us to understand. The view I am calling *secular naturalism* fully endorses this picture of ultimate reality. Now since the view is "secular" and completely rejects the anything beyond the physical it must obviously deny the existence of the theist's God. You might be tempted, therefore, to characterize this view as simple *atheism*. Secular naturalists are, indeed, atheists in this technical sense. I have chosen the jargon of secular naturalism, however, because many adherents are offering more than a negative view about what they believe does not exist, but a positive view about what does exist.

For many secular naturalists the view is more than an abstract theory about what does and does not exist. Recall Clifford Geertz's characterization of religion on page 5. Secular naturalism can fall within all five of his criteria for religion. Or as Tillich had put it, secular naturalism can be "the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, *of what you take seriously without any reservation.*"⁷ This view of metaphysical reality can inform a reflective person's views on morality, politics, and the meaning of life. Some of you have probably heard of ***secular humanism***, and this philosophy fits within the secular naturalism paradigm, but lots of other views about humanity also count as genuinely secular naturalistic in their assumptions and beliefs.

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Recall the map of the world's religions on page 3. The view I am calling ***religious pluralism*** offers an interesting explanation of what we see there. The pluralist says there are obviously very different religious systems that enjoy the faith of millions of smart, hardworking, and decent human beings. How could it be that only one of these religions is the "true" one, and all the rest so seriously "mistaken?" Might there not be some sort of intellectual compromise where all of them are equally?

We can interpret religious pluralism as a kind of metaphysical compromise between theism and secular naturalism. The secular naturalist denies the existence of anything beyond the natural world. Religious pluralists adamantly disagree. They point out that almost every culture that has ever been studied believes in something beyond the physical-natural world. The contemporary cultures captured on our comparative world religions map show that this pattern continues into the twenty first century. How could this many people be so spectacularly wrong? Of course, the pluralist argues, there is something

beyond the natural world. Humans have always recognized that in some sense or another. It is this "something" that all of the world's religion celebrate.

Theistic faiths believe that God exists. They are forced, not necessarily out of arrogance or self interest, but as a simple matter of logic, to insist that their view of religious reality is the correct one, and that the non-theistic religions are fundamentally incorrect. How can one believe in the basic truth of the New Testament and at the same time grant the basic truth of the Hindu tradition? Pluralists have a hard time with the notion that one religious tradition enjoys some sort of privileged position with respect to religious truth. So how do we make sense of the passion with which the different faiths cling to the notion that they enjoy special insight into the ultimate nature of religious reality?

Most of you have heard the expression ***rose colored glasses***. In colloquial speech people who see the world through rose colored glasses are not just happy and optimistic, they are naive and a bit foolish. They delude themselves into not recognizing the bad things around them that everyone else plainly sees. But the expression, like a "jack knifed" tractor rig, is a dead metaphor -- it began its life as a full-blown metaphor. Consider the optics of a pair of rose tinged glasses. What would a person wearing them see as she stares at pure white screen? The screen would appear to have a reddish tinge, right? And a greenish tinge if the lens were green, and so on for blue or yellow lenses.

Now let's extend this metaphor to a higher level of abstraction. In place of the white screen substitute the religious pluralist's notion of the divine "something" that unites all of the world's religion. We might call this something by a number of names suggested by theologians and philosophers -- the ***numinous***, the ***ultimate***, or many

others. Let the "lens" now be, not pieces of glass, but a whole cultural and religious tradition "through which" the religious person "sees" this numinous or ultimate "something." Two things follow from carrying through this little thought experiment. One is that no tradition can see the numinous as it *really* is. Everyone is doomed to understand it through the lens of his or her culture and religious background. The second is that the person genuinely "sees" a reality, plain as day, especially if everyone one around is wearing the same kind of "lens." No wonder that sincerely religious people are so committed to the truth of their own perspective.

¹ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, p. 30.

² Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System"

³ (*Davis v. Beason, supra*, 342).

⁴ (Tillich 57, as quoted by the Court, 380 U.S. 187

⁵ See, Wittgenstein, for a full description of this famous example.

⁶ Atchenstein on semantically relevant properties.

⁷ Reference back to Tillich and the quote earlier in the chapter.